



MORGAN RICE

A THRONE
FOR SISTERS

BOOK ONE

A Throne for Sisters

Морган Райс

A Throne for Sisters

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From #1 Bestseller Morgan Rice comes an unforgettable new fantasy series. In A THRONE FOR SISTERS (Book one), Sophia, 17, and her younger sister Kate, 15, are desperate to leave their horrific orphanage. Orphans, unwanted and unloved, they nonetheless dream of coming of age elsewhere, of finding a better life, even if that means living on the streets of the brutal city of Ashton. Sophia and Kate, also best friends, have each other's backs—and yet they want different things from life. Sophia, a romantic, more elegant, dreams of entering court and finding a noble to fall in love with. Kate, a fighter, dreams of mastering the sword, of battling dragons, and becoming a warrior. They are both united, though, by their secret, paranormal power to read other's minds, their only saving grace in a world that seems bent to destroy them. As they each embark on a quest and adventure their own ways, they struggle to survive. Faced with choices neither can imagine, their choices may propel them to the highest power—or plunge them to the lowest depths. A THRONE FOR SISTERS is the first book in a dazzling new fantasy series rife with love, heartbreak, tragedy, action, magic, sorcery, fate and heart-pounding suspense. A page turner, it is filled with characters that will make you fall in love, and a world you will never forget.

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Morgan Rice

A THRONE FOR SISTERS

Morgan Rice

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CHAPTER ONE

Of all the things to hate in the House of the Unclaimed, the grinding wheel was the one Sophia dreaded most. She groaned as she pushed against an arm connected to the giant post that disappeared into the floor, while around her, the other orphans shoved against theirs. She ached and sweated as she pushed at it, her red hair matting with the work, her rough gray dress staining further with the sweat. Her dress was shorter than she wanted now, riding up with every stride to show the tattoo on her calf in the shape of a mask, marking her as what she was: an orphan, an owned thing.

The other girls there had things even worse. At seventeen, Sophia was at least one of the oldest and largest of them. The only person older in the room was Sister O’Venn. The nun of the Masked Goddess wore the jet black habit of her order, along with a lace mask that every orphan quickly learned she could see through, down to the smallest detail of failure. The sister held the leather strap that she used to dole out punishment, flexing it between her hands while she droned on in the background, uttering the words of the *Book of Masks*, homilies about the need to perfect abandoned souls such as them.

“In this place, you learn to be useful,” she intoned. “In this place, you learn to be valuable, as you were not to whatever fallen women gave birth to you. The Masked Goddess tells us that we must shape our place in the world through our efforts, and today your efforts turn the querns that grind the corn and – pay attention, Sophia!”

Sophia flinched as she felt the impact of her belt as it cracked out. She gritted her teeth. How many times had the sisters beaten her in her life? For doing the wrong thing, or for not doing the right thing quickly enough? For being pretty enough that it constituted a sin in and of itself? For having the flame red hair of a troublemaker?

If only they knew about her talent. She shuddered to think of it. For then, they would have beaten her to death.

“Are you ignoring me, you stupid girl?” the nun demanded. She struck out again, and again. “Kneel facing the wall, all of you!”

That was the worst part: it didn’t *matter* if you did everything right. The sisters would beat everyone for the failings of one girl.

“You need to be reminded,” Sister O’Venn snapped, as Sophia heard a girl cry out, “of what you are. Of *where* you are.” Another girl whimpered as the leather strap struck flesh. “You are the children no one wanted. You are the property of the Masked Goddess, given a home through her grace.”

She made her way around the room, and Sophia knew she would be last. The idea was to make her feel guilt for the pain of the others, and give them time to hate her for bringing this on them, before she got her beating.

The beating she was kneeling there waiting for.

When she could just leave.

That thought came to Sophia so unbidden that she had to check it wasn’t some kind of sending from her younger sister, or that she hadn’t picked it up from one of the others. That was the problem with a talent like hers: it came when it wanted, not when called. Yet it seemed that the thought really was hers – and more than that, it was true.

Better to risk death than to stay here one more day.

Of course, if she dared to walk away, the punishment would be worse. They always found a way to make it worse. Sophia had seen girls who had stolen or fought back starved for days, forced to keep kneeling, beaten when they tried to sleep.

But she didn’t care anymore. Something inside her had crossed a line. The fear couldn’t touch her, because it was swamped in the fear of what would happen soon anyway.

After all, she turned seventeen today.

She was now old enough to repay her debt of years of “care” at the hands of the nuns – to be indentured and sold like livestock. Sophia knew what happened to orphans who came of age. Compared to that, no beating mattered.

She had been turning it over in her mind for weeks, in fact. Dreading this day, her birthday. And now it had arrived.

To her own shock, Sophia acted. She stood smoothly, looked around. The nun’s attention was on another girl, whipping her savagely, so it was but the work of a moment to slip over to the door in silence. Probably even the other girls didn’t notice, or if they did, they were too frightened to say anything.

Sophia stepped out into one of the plain white corridors of the orphanage, moving quietly, walking away from the workroom. There were other nuns out there, but so long as she moved with purpose, it might be enough to keep them from stopping her.

What had she just done?

Sophia kept walking through the House of the Unclaimed in a daze, barely able to believe that she was actually doing this. There were reasons they didn’t bother locking the front gates. The city beyond, just outside its gates, was a rough place – and rougher still for those who had started life as an orphan. Ashton had every city’s thieves and thugs – yet it also contained the hunters who recaptured the indentured who ran and the free folk who would spit on her simply for what she was.

Then there was her sister. Kate was only fifteen. Sophia didn’t want to drag her into something worse. Kate was tough, tougher even than her, yet she was still Sophia’s little sister.

Sophia wandered down toward the cloisters and the courtyard where they mixed with the boys from the orphanage next door, trying to work out where her sister would be. She couldn’t leave without her.

She was almost there when she heard a girl cry out.

Sophia headed toward the sound, half suspecting that her little sister had gotten herself into another fight. When she reached the yard, though, she didn’t find Kate at the center of a brawling mob, but another girl instead. This one was even younger, perhaps in her thirteenth year, and was being pushed and slapped by three boys who must have been almost old enough to sell off into apprenticeships or the army.

“Stop that!” Sophia cried out, surprising herself as much as she seemed to surprise the boys there. Normally the rule was that you walked past whatever was happening in the orphanage. You stayed quiet and remembered your place. Now, though, she stepped forward.

“Leave her be.”

The boys paused, but only to stare at her.

The oldest set his eyes upon her with a malicious grin.

“Well, well, boys,” he said, “looks like we have another one who isn’t where she should be.”

He had blunt features and the kind of dead look in his eyes that only came from years in the House of the Unclaimed.

He stepped forward, and before she could react, he grabbed Sophia’s arm. She went to slap him, but he was too quick, and he shoved her to the floor. It was in moments like this that Sophia wished she had her younger sister’s fighting skills, her ability to summon an instant brutality that Sophia, for all her cunning, just wasn’t capable of.

Going to be sold as a whore anyway... might as well have my turn.

Sophia was startled to hear his thoughts. These had an almost greasy feel to them, and she knew they were his. Her panic welled up.

She started to struggle, but he pinned her arms easily.

There was only one thing she could do. She screwed up her concentration, calling on her talent, hoping that this time it would work for her.

Kate, she sent, the courtyard! Help me!

*

“More elegantly, Kate!” the nun called. “More *elegantly!*”

Kate didn't have a lot of time for elegance, but still, she made the effort as she poured water into a goblet held by the sister. Sister Yvaine regarded her critically from beneath her mask.

“No, you still haven't got it. And I know you're not clumsy, girl. I've seen you turning cartwheels in the yard.”

She hadn't punished Kate for it, though, which suggested that Sister Yvaine wasn't one of the worst of them. Kate tried again, her hand trembling.

She and the other girls with her were supposed to be learning to serve elegantly at noble tables, but the truth was that Kate wasn't built for it. She was too short and too tightly muscled for the kind of graceful femininity the nuns had in mind. There was a reason she kept her red hair hacked short. In the ideal world, where she was free to choose, she yearned for an apprenticeship with a smith or perhaps one of the groups of players who worked in the city – or perhaps even a chance to go into the army as the boys did. This graceful pouring was the kind of lesson her big sister, with her dream of aristocracy, would have enjoyed – not her.

As if the thought summoned her, Kate suddenly snapped to as she heard her sister's voice in her mind. She wondered, though; their talent wasn't always that reliable.

But then it came again, and there, too, was the feeling behind it.

Kate, the courtyard! Help me!

Kate could feel the fear there.

She stepped away from the nun sharply, involuntarily, and in so doing she spilled her jug of water across the stone of the floor.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I need to go.”

Sister Yvaine was still staring at the water.

“Kate, clean that up at once!”

But Kate was already running. She would probably find herself beaten for it later, but she'd been beaten before. It didn't mean anything. Helping the one person in the world she cared about did.

She ran through the orphanage. She knew the way, because she'd learned every twist and turn of the place in the years since that awful night they dropped her here. She also, late at night, sneaked out from the ceaseless snoring and stench of the dormitory when she could, enjoying the place in the blackness when she was the only one up, when the tolling of the city's bells was the only sound, and learning the feel of every nook in its walls. She sensed she would need it one day.

And now she did.

Kate could hear the sound of her sister, fighting and calling for help. On instinct, she ducked into a room, grabbing a poker from the fire grate and continuing on. What she would do with it, she didn't know.

She burst into the courtyard, and her heart fell to see her sister being pinned down by two boys while another fumbled with her dress.

Kate knew exactly what to do.

A primal rage overcame her, one she could not control if she wished, and Kate rushed forward with a roar, swinging the poker at the first boy's head. He turned as Kate struck, so it didn't hit him as well as she wanted, but it was still enough to send him sprawling, clutching at the spot she'd hit.

She lashed out at another, catching him across the knee as he stood, making him tumble. She struck the third in the stomach, until he keeled over.

She kept hitting, not wanting to give the boys any time to recover. She'd been in plenty of fights in her years at the orphanage, and she knew that she couldn't rely on size or strength. Fury was the only thing she had to carry her through. And thankfully, Kate had plenty of that.

She struck and she struck, until the boys fell back. They might have been prepared to join the army, but the Masked Brothers on their side didn't teach them to fight. That would have made them too hard to control. Kate struck one of the boys in the face, then spun back to hit another's elbow with a crack of iron on bone.

"Stand up," she said to her sister, holding out her hand. "Stand *up*!"

Her sister stood numbly, taking Kate's hand as though she were the younger sister for once.

Kate set off running, and her sister ran with her. Sophia appeared to come back to herself as they ran, some of the old certainty seeming to return as they raced along the corridors of the orphanage.

Behind them, Kate could hear shouting, from boys or sisters or both. She didn't care. She knew there was no way but out.

"We can't go back," Sophia said. "We have to leave the orphanage."

Kate nodded. Something like this wouldn't earn just a beating as punishment. But then Kate remembered.

"Then we go," Kate replied, running. "First I just need to – "

"No," Sophia said. "There's no time. Leave everything. We need to *go*."

Kate shook her head. There were some things she couldn't leave behind.

So instead, she raced in the direction of her dormitory, keeping hold of Sophia's arm so that she would follow.

The dormitory was a bleak place, with beds that were little more than wooden slats sticking out from the wall like shelves. Kate wasn't stupid enough to put anything that mattered in the small chest at the foot of her bed, where anyone could steal it. Instead, she went to a crack between two floorboards, worrying at it with her fingers until one lifted.

"Kate," Sophia huffed and puffed, catching her breath, "there's no time."

Kate shook her head.

"I won't leave it behind."

Sophia had to know what she'd come for; the one memento she had from that night, from their old life.

Finally, Kate's finger's fastened around metal, and she lifted the locket clear to shine in the dim light.

When she was a child, she'd been sure that it was real gold; a fortune waiting to be spent. As she'd gotten older, she'd come to see that it was some cheaper alloy, but by then, it had come to be worth far more than gold to her anyway. The miniature inside, of a woman smiling while a man had his hand on her shoulder, was the closest thing to a memory of her parents she had.

Kate normally didn't wear it for fear that one of the other children, or the nuns, would take it from her. Now, she tucked it inside her dress.

"Let's go," she said.

They ran for the door to the orphanage, supposedly always open because the Masked Goddess had found doors closed to her when she visited the world and had condemned those within. Kate and Sophia ran down the twists and turns of the corridors, coming out to the hallway, looking around for any pursuers.

Kate could hear them, but right then, there was only the usual sister beside the door: a fat woman who moved to block the way even as the two of them approached. Kate flushed red as she immediately recalled all the years of beatings she'd taken by her hands.

"There you are," she said in a stern tone. "You've both been very disobedient, and – "

Kate didn't pause; she hit her in the stomach with the poker, hard enough to double her up. Right then, she wished it were one of the elegant swords that courtiers wore, or maybe an axe. As it was, she had to settle for merely stunning the woman long enough for her and Sophia to run past.

But then, as Kate passed through the doors, she stopped.

"Kate!" Sophia yelled, panic in her voice. "Let's go! What are you doing?!"

But Kate couldn't control it. Even with the shouts of those in hot pursuit. Even knowing it was risking both of their freedom.

She took two steps forward, raised the poker high, and smashed the nun again and again across her back.

The nun grunted and cried with each blow, and each sound was music to Kate's ears.

"Kate!" Sophia pleaded, on the verge of tears.

Kate stared at the nun for a long time, too long, needing to ingrain that picture of vengeance, of justice, into her mind. It would sustain her, she knew, for whatever horrific beatings might follow.

Then she turned and burst out with her sister from the House of the Unclaimed, like two fugitives from a sinking ship. The stink and noise and bustle of the city hit Kate, but this time she didn't slow.

She held her sister's hand and ran.

And ran.

And ran.

And despite it all, she took a deep breath and smiled wide.

However short it might be, they had found freedom.

CHAPTER TWO

Sophia had never been so afraid, but at the same time, she had never felt so alive, or so free. As she ran through the city with her sister, she heard Kate whoop with the excitement of it, and it both set her at ease and terrified her. It made this too real. Their life would never be the same again.

“Quiet,” Sophia insisted. “You’ll bring them down on us.”

“They’re coming anyway,” her sister replied. “We might as well enjoy it.”

As if to emphasize the point, she dodged around a horse, snatched an apple from a cart, and ran across Ashton’s cobbles.

The city was bustling with the market that came to it every Sixthday, and Sophia looked around, startled at all the sights and sounds and smells. If it weren’t for the market, she’d have no idea what day it was. In the House of the Unclaimed, those things didn’t matter, only the endless cycles of prayer and work, punishment and rote learning.

Run faster, her sister sent.

The sound of whistles and cries somewhere behind them spurred her on to new speed. Sophia led the way down an alley, then struggled to follow as Kate scrambled over a wall. Her sister, for all her impetuosity, was too quick, like a solid, coiled muscle waiting to spring.

Sophia barely managed to clamber over as more whistles sounded, and as she neared the top, Kate’s strong hand was waiting for her, as always. Even in this, she realized, they were so different: Kate’s hand was rough, calloused, muscular, while Sophia’s fingers were long and smooth and delicate.

Two sides of the same coin, their mother used to say.

“They’ve summoned the watchmen,” Kate called out in disbelief, as if that somehow wasn’t playing fair.

“What did you expect?” Sophia replied. “We’re running away before they can sell us off.”

Kate led the way down narrow cobblestone steps, then toward an open space thronging with people. Sophia forced herself to slow as they approached the city’s market, holding onto Kate’s forearm to keep her from running.

We’ll blend in more if we aren’t running, Sophia sent, too out of breath to speak.

Kate didn’t look certain, but she still matched Sophia’s pace.

They walked slowly, brushing past people who stepped aside, obviously unwilling to risk contact with anyone as lowborn as them. Perhaps they thought that the two were released for some errand.

Sophia forced herself to look as though she were just browsing while they used the crowd for camouflage. She looked around, to the clock tower above the temple of the Masked Goddess, at the various stalls, and the glass-fronted shops beyond them. There was a group of players in one corner of the square, acting out one of the traditional tales in elaborate costumes while one of the censors looked on from the edge of the surrounding crowd. There was a recruiter for the army standing on a box, trying to recruit troops for the newest war to take hold of this city, a looming battle across the Knife-Water Channel.

Sophia saw her sister eyeing the recruiter, and pulled her back.

No, Sophia sent. *That’s not for you.*

Kate was about to reply when suddenly the shouts began again behind them.

They both took off.

Sophia knew that no one would help them now. This was Ashton, which meant that she and Kate were the ones in the wrong here. No one would try to help two runaways.

In fact, as she looked up, Sophia saw someone start to move into their way, to block them. No one would let two orphans get away from what they owed, from what they were.

Hands grabbed for them, and now they had to fight their way through. Sophia slapped away a hand from her shoulder, while Kate jabbed viciously with her stolen poker.

A gap opened up in front of them, and Sophia saw her sister running for a section of abandoned wooden scaffolding beside a stone wall, where builders must have been trying to straighten a façade.

More climbing? Sophia sent.

They won't follow us, her sister shot back.

Which was probably true, if only because the chasing pack of ordinary people wouldn't risk their lives like that. Sophia dreaded it, though. Yet she couldn't think of any better ideas right then.

Her shaking hands closed around the wooden slats of the scaffolding, and she started to climb.

In a matter of moments, her arms started to ache, but by then it was either keep going or fall, and even if there hadn't been the cobbles below, Sophia didn't want to fall with most of a mob chasing after her.

Kate was already waiting at the top, still grinning as if the whole thing were some game. Her hand was there again, and she pulled Sophia up, and then they were running again – this time on rooftops.

Kate led the way to a gap leading to another roof, hopping into the thatch as if she didn't care about the risk of going through. Sophia followed her, biting back the urge to cry out as she nearly slipped, then leaping with her sister onto a low section where a dozen chimneys belched out smoke from a kiln below.

Kate tried to run again, but Sophia, sensing an opportunity, grabbed her and yanked her down into the thatch, hidden amongst the stacks.

Wait, she sent.

To her amazement, Kate didn't argue. She looked about as they huddled down in the flat section of roof, ignoring the heat coming up from the fires below, and she must have realized how hidden they were. The smoke blurred most of what was around them, putting them in a fog, further hiding them. It was like a second city up here, with lines of clothes, flags, and pennants providing all the cover they could want. If they stayed still, no one could possibly spot them here. Nor would anyone else be foolish enough to risk treading on the thatch.

Sophia looked about. It was peaceful up here in its own way. There were spots where the houses were close enough that neighbors could reach out to touch one another, and further along, Sophie saw a chamber pot being emptied into the street. She'd never had a chance to see the city from this angle, the towers of the clergy and the shot makers, the clock keepers and the wise men rising up over the rest of it, the palace sitting in its own ring of walls like some shining carbuncle on the skin of the rest.

She hunched down there with her sister, her arms wrapped around Kate, and waited for the sounds of pursuit to pass below.

Maybe, just maybe, they'd find a way out.

CHAPTER THREE

Morning faded into afternoon before Sophia and Kate dared to creep out of their hiding place. As Sophia had thought, no one had dared clamber up onto the rooftops to search for them, and while the sounds of pursuit had come close, they'd never quite come close enough.

Now, they seemed to have faded entirely.

Kate peeked out and looked down at the city below. The morning's bustle was gone, replaced by a more relaxed pace and crowd.

"We need to get down from here," Sophia whispered to her sister.

Kate nodded. "I'm starving."

Sophia could understand that. Their stolen apple was long gone, and hunger was starting to gnaw at her stomach, too.

They lowered themselves to street level, and Sophia found herself looking around as they did. Even though the sounds of people hunting for them had gone, a part of her was convinced that someone would leap out at them the moment their feet touched the ground.

They picked their way through the streets, trying to keep out of sight as much as they could. It was impossible to avoid people in Ashton, though, because there were simply so many of them. The nuns hadn't bothered to teach them much about the shape of the world, but Sophia had heard that there were bigger cities beyond the Merchant States.

Right then, it was hard to believe it. There were people everywhere she looked, even though most of the city's population had to be inside, hard at work, by now. There were children playing on the street, women walking to and from markets and shops, workmen carrying tools and ladders. There were taverns and playhouses, shops selling coffee from the newly discovered lands past the Mirror Ocean, cafes where people seemed to be almost as interested in talking as in eating. She could hardly believe to see people laughing, happy, so carefree, doing nothing but idling the time and enjoying themselves. She could hardly believe that such a world could even exist. It was a shocking contrast to the enforced quiet and obedience of the orphanage.

There's so much, Sophia sent to her sister, eyeing the food stalls everywhere, feeling her stomach pain grow with each passing smell.

Kate was looking around it all with a practical eye. She picked one of the cafes, moving up toward it cautiously while people outside laughed at a would-be philosopher trying to argue over how much of the world it was possible to really know.

"You'd have an easier time if you weren't drunk," one of them heckled.

Another turned toward Sophia and Kate as they approached. The hostility there was palpable.

"We don't want your sort here," he sneered. "Get out!"

The sheer anger of it was more than Sophia had expected. Still, she shuffled back to the street, pulling Kate with her so that her sister wouldn't do anything they'd regret. She might have dropped her poker somewhere in running from the mob, but she certainly had a look that said she wanted to hit something.

They had no choice, then: they would have to steal their food. Sophia had hoped that someone might show them charity. Yet that wasn't the way the world worked, she knew.

It was time to use their talents, they both realized, nodding to each silently at the same time. They stood on opposite sides of an alley and both watched and waited as a baker worked. Sophia waited until the baker could read her thoughts, and then told her what she wanted her to hear.

Oh no, the baker thought. *The rolls. How could I forget them inside?*

Barely had the baker had the thought than Sophia and Kate burst into action, rushing forward the second the woman turned her back to go back inside for the rolls. They moved quickly, each snatching an armful of cakes, enough to fill their bellies almost to bursting.

They both ducked behind an alley and chewed ravenously. Soon, Sophia felt her belly full, a strange and pleasant sensation, and one she'd never had. The House of the Unclaimed didn't believe in feeding its charges more than the bare minimum.

Now she laughed as Kate attempted to shove an entire pastry into her mouth.

What? her sister demanded.

It's just good to see you happy, Sophia sent back.

She wasn't sure how long that happiness would last. She kept an eye out with every step for the hunters who might be after them. The orphanage wouldn't want to put more effort into reclaiming them than their indentures were worth, but who could tell when it came to the vindictiveness of the nuns? At the very least, they would have to keep clear of the watchmen, and not just because they'd escaped.

Thieves, after all, were hanged in Ashton.

We need to stop looking like runaway orphans or we'll never be able to walk through the city without people staring and trying to catch us.

Sophia looked over at her sister, surprised by the thought.

You want to steal clothes? Sophia sent back.

Kate nodded.

That thought brought an extra note of fear and yet Sophia knew her sister, ever practical, was right.

They both stood at the same time, stuffing the extra cakes in their waists. Sophia was looking about for clothes, when she felt Kate touch her arm. She followed her gaze and saw it: a clothesline, high up on a roof. It was unguarded.

Of course it would be, she realized with relief. *Who, after all, would guard a clothesline?*

Even so, Sophia could feel her heart pounding as they clambered up onto another roof. They both paused, looked about, then reeled in the line the way a fisherman might have pulled in a line of fish.

Sophia stole an outer dress of green wool, along with a cream underdress that was probably the kind of thing a farmer's wife might wear, but was still impossibly rich to her. To her surprise, her sister picked out an undershirt, breeches, and doublet, which left her looking more like a spike-haired boy than the girl she was.

"Kate," Sophia complained. "You can't run around looking like that!"

Kate shrugged. "Neither of us is supposed to look like this. I might as well be comfortable."

There was a kind of truth in that. The sumptuary laws were clear about what each grade of society could and couldn't wear, the unclaimed and the indentured. Here they were, breaking more laws, tossing aside their rags, the only thing they were allowed to wear, and dressing better than they were.

"All right," Sophia said. "I won't argue. Besides, maybe it will throw off anyone who is looking for two girls," she said with a laugh.

"I do *not* look like a boy," Kate snapped back in obvious indignation.

Sophia smiled at that. They salvaged their cakes, stuffed them in their new pockets, and together, they were off.

The next part was harder to smile about; there remained so many things they needed to do if they wanted to actually survive. They had to find shelter, for one thing, and then work out what they were going to do, where they were going to go.

One step at a time, she reminded herself.

They scrambled back down to the streets, and this time Sophia led the way, trying to find a route through the poorer section of the city, still too close to the orphanage for her tastes.

She saw a string of burnt out houses ahead, obviously not recovered from one of the fires that sometimes swept through the city when the river was low. It would be a dangerous place to rest.

Even so, Sophia headed for them.

Kate gave her a wondering, skeptical look.

Sophia shrugged.

Dangerous is better than nothing at all, she sent.

They approached cautiously, and just as Sophia stuck her head around the corner, she was startled as a pair of figures rose up out of the wreckage. They appeared so soot-blackened by staying in the charred remains that for a moment Sophia thought they'd been in the fire.

"Geddout! Leave our patch alone!"

One of them rushed at Sophia, and she shrieked as she took an involuntary step back. Kate looked as though she might fight, but then the other figure there pulled a dagger that shone far brighter than anything else there.

"This is our claim! Pick your own ruin, or I'll bleed you."

The sisters ran then, putting as much distance between them and the house as they could. With every step, Sophia was sure that she could hear the footsteps of knife-wielding thugs, or watchmen, or the nuns, somewhere behind them.

They walked until their legs hurt and the afternoon grew far too dark. At least they took solace that, with every step, they were one step farther from the orphanage.

Finally, they approached a slightly better part of town. For some reason, Kate's face brightened at the sight of it.

"What is it?" Sophia asked.

"The penny library," her sister replied. "We can slip in there. I sneak away sometimes, when the sisters send us on errands, and the librarian lets me in even though I don't have the penny to pay."

Sophia didn't hold much hope of finding help there, but the truth was that she didn't have any better ideas. She let Kate lead her, and they headed for a busy space where moneylenders mixed with advocates and there were even a few carriages mixed in with the normal horses and pedestrians.

The library was one of the larger buildings there. Sophia knew the story: that one of the nobles of the city had decided to educate the poor and left a portion of his fortune to build the kind of library that most just kept locked away in their country homes. Of course, charging a penny a visit still meant that the poorest couldn't visit. Sophia had never had a penny. The nuns saw no reason to give their charges money.

She and Kate approached the entrance, and she saw an aging man sitting there, soft looking in slightly worn clothes, obviously as much a guard as a librarian. To Sophia's surprise, he smiled as they approached. Sophia had never seen anyone happy to see her sister before.

"Young Kate," he said. "It has been a while since you have been here. And you've brought a friend. Go through, go through. I will not stand in the way of knowledge. Earl Varrish's son may have put a penny tax on knowledge, but the old earl never believed in it."

He seemed genuine about it, but Kate was already shaking her head.

"That's not what we need, Geoffrey," Kate said. "My sister and I...we ran away from the orphanage."

Sophia caught the shock on the older man's face.

"No," he said. "No, you must not do such a foolish thing."

"It's done," Sophia said.

"Then you cannot be here," Geoffrey insisted. "If the watch come, and they find you here with me, they may assume that I had some role in this."

Sophia would have left then, but it seemed that Kate still wanted to try.

"Please, Geoffrey," Kate said. "I need –"

"You need to go back," Geoffrey said. "Beg forgiveness. I have pity for your situation, but it is the situation fate has handed you. Go back before the watch catch you. I cannot help you. I may even be flogged for not alerting the watch that I saw you. That is all the kindness I can give you."

His voice was harsh, and yet Sophia could see the kindness in his eyes, and that it pained him to say the words. Almost as if he were battling himself, as if he were putting on a show of being harsh only to drive home his point.

Even so, Kate looked crushed. Sophia hated to see her sister that way.

Sophia pulled her back, away from the library.

As they walked, Kate, head down, finally spoke.

“What now?” she asked.

The truth was that Sophia didn’t have an answer.

They kept walking, but by now, she was exhausted from walking so long. It was starting to rain, too, in that steady way that suggested it wouldn’t stop soon. Few places did rain the way Ashton did.

Sophia found herself gravitating down the sloped cobblestone streets toward the river that ran through the city. Sophia wasn’t sure what she hoped to find there, among the barges and the flat-bottomed punts. She doubted that wharf hands or whores were likely to be of any help to them, and those seemed to be the main things this part of the city held. But at least it was a destination. If nothing else, they could find a place to hide by its shores and watch the peaceful sailing of the ships, and dream of other places.

Eventually, Sophia spotted a shallow overhang near one of the city’s many bridges. She approached. She reeled from the stench, as did Kate, and the infestation of rats. But her tiredness made even the meanest scrap of shelter seem like a palace. They had to get out of the rain. They had to get out of sight. And right then, what else was there? They had to find a spot where no one else, even vagrants, dared to go. And this was it.

“Here?” Kate asked, in disgust. “Couldn’t we go back to the chimney?”

Sophia shook her head. She doubted that they would be able to find it again, and even if they could, it would be where any hunters would start to look. This was the best place they were going to find before the rain got worse and before night fell.

She settled down and tried to hide her tears for her sister’s sake.

Slowly, reluctantly, Kate sat down beside her, clutching her arms to her knees and rocking herself, as if to shut out the cruelty and barbarism and hopelessness of the world.

CHAPTER FOUR

In Kate's dreams, her parents were still alive, and she was happy. Whenever she dreamed, it seemed that they were there, although the faces weren't memories so much as constructed things, with only the locket to guide them. Kate hadn't been old enough for more when it all changed.

She was in a house somewhere in the countryside, where the view from the leaded windows took in orchards and fields. Kate dreamed the warmth of the sun on her skin, the gentle breeze that ruffled through the leaves outside.

The next part never seemed to make sense. She didn't know enough of the details, or she hadn't remembered them right. She tried to force her dream to give her the whole story of what had happened, but it gave her fragments instead:

An open window, with stars outside. Her sister's hand, Sophia's voice in her head, telling her to hide. Looking for their parents through the maze of the house...

Hiding through the house in the dark. Hearing the sounds of someone moving about there. There was light beyond, even though it was night outside. She felt she was close, on the verge of discovering what finally happened to their parents that night. The light from the window started to grow brighter, and brighter, and —

"Wake up," Sophia said, shaking her. "You're dreaming, Kate."

Kate's eyes flickered open resentfully. Dreams were always so much better than the world she lived in.

She squinted at the light. Impossibly, morning had arrived. Her first day ever sleeping a full night outside the stench and screams of the orphanage's walls, her first morning ever waking up somewhere, anywhere, else. Even in a dank place like this, she was elated.

She noticed not just the difference from the failing afternoon light; it was the way the river in front of them had sprung into life with the barges and boats hurrying to make the most distance upriver they could. Some moved with small sails, others with poles pushing them or horses towing them from the side of the river.

Around them, Kate could hear the rest of the city waking up. The bells of the temple were sounding the hour, while in between, she could hear the chatter of a whole city's worth of people making their way to work, or setting off on other journeys. Today was Firstday, a good day to begin things. Maybe that would mean good luck for her and Sophia, too.

"I keep having the same dream," Kate said. "I keep dreaming about... about that night."

They always seemed to stop short of calling it more than that. It was strange, when they could probably communicate more directly than anyone else in the city, that she and Sophia still hesitated talking around this one thing.

Sophia's expression darkened, and Kate immediately felt bad about that.

"I dream about it too, sometimes," Sophia admitted sadly.

Kate turned to her, focused. Her sister had to know. She'd been older, she would have seen more.

"You *know* what happened, don't you?" Kate asked. "You know what happened with our parents."

It was more of a statement than a question.

Kate scanned her sister's face for answers, and she saw it, just a flicker, something she was hiding.

Sophia shook her head.

"There are some things it's better not to think about. We need to focus on what happens next, not on the past."

It wasn't exactly a satisfying answer, but it was no more than Kate had expected. Sophia wouldn't talk about what happened the night their parents left. She never wanted to discuss it, and even Kate had to admit to feelings of unease every time she thought about it. Besides, in the House of the Unclaimed, they didn't like it when orphans tried to talk about the past. They called it ungrateful, and it was just one more thing worthy of punishment.

Kate kicked a rat off of her foot and sat up straighter, looking around.

"We can't stay where we are," she said.

Sophia nodded.

"We'll die if we stay here on the streets."

That was a hard thought, but it was probably true, as well. There were so many ways to die in the streets of this city. Cold and hunger were just the start of the list. With the street gangs, the watch, disease, and all the other risks out here, even the orphanage started to look safe.

Not that Kate would ever go back. She would burn it to the ground before she stepped back through its doors. Maybe one day she would burn it to the ground anyway. She smiled at that.

Feeling a hunger pain, Kate pulled out the last of her cake and began to wolf it down. Then she remembered her sister. She tore off half and handed it to her.

Sophia looked at her hopefully, but with guilt.

"It's okay," Kate lied. "I have another in my dress."

Sophia took it reluctantly. Kate sensed her sister knew she was lying, but was too hungry to deny herself. Yet their connection was so close, Kate could feel her sister's hunger, and Kate could never allow herself to be happy if her sister was not.

They both finally crept out of their hiding place.

"So, big sister," Kate asked, "any ideas?"

Sophie sighed sadly and shook her head.

"Well, I'm starving," Kate said. "It will be better to think on a full belly."

Sophia nodded in agreement, and they both headed back toward the main streets.

They soon found a target – a different baker – and stole breakfast the way they'd stolen their last meal. As they ducked into an alley and gorged themselves, it was tempting to think that they might live the rest of their lives like that, using their shared talent to take what they needed when no one was paying attention. But Kate knew it couldn't work like that. Nothing good lasted forever.

Kate looked out at the bustle of the city before her. It was overwhelming. And its streets seemed to stretch forever.

"If we can't stay out on the street," she said, "what do we do? Where do we go?"

Sophia hesitated for a moment, looking as though she was as unsure as Kate was.

"I don't know," she admitted.

"Well, what *can* we do?" Kate asked.

It didn't seem like as long a list as it should have been. The truth was that orphans like them didn't get options in their lives. They were prepared for lives where they would be indentured as apprentices or servants, soldiers, or worse. There was no real expectation that they would ever be free, because even those genuinely looking for an apprentice would only pay a pittance; not enough to ever pay off their debt.

And the truth was that Kate had little patience for sewing or cooking, etiquette or haberdashery.

"We could find some trader and try to apprentice ourselves," Kate suggested.

Sophia shook her head.

"Even if we could find one willing to take us on, they would want to hear from our families beforehand. When we couldn't produce a father to vouch for us, they would know what we were."

Kate had to admit that her sister had a point.

"Well then, we could sign on as barge hands, and see the rest of the country."

Even as she said it, she knew that was probably just as ludicrous as her first idea. A barge captain would still ask questions, and probably any hunters of escaped orphans would watch the barges for those trying to escape. They certainly couldn't rely on someone else to help them, not after what had happened in the library, with the only man in this city she had considered a friend.

What a naïve fool she had been.

Sophia seemed to get the enormity of what faced them as well. She was looking away with a wistful expression on her face.

"If you could do anything," Sophia asked, "if you could go anywhere, where would you go?"

Kate hadn't thought about it in those terms.

"I don't know," she said. "I mean, I never thought past just surviving the day."

Sophia fell silent for a long time. Kate could feel her thinking.

Finally, Sophia spoke.

"If we try to do anything normal, there are going to be just as many obstacles as if we shoot for the biggest things in the world. Maybe even more, because people *expect* people like us to settle for less. So what do you want, more than anything?"

Kate thought about that.

"I want to find our parents," Kate said, realizing it as she spoke it.

She could feel the flash of pain that ran through Sophia with those words.

"Our parents are dead," Sophia said. She sounded so certain that Kate wanted to ask her again what had happened all those years ago. "I'm sorry, Kate. That wasn't what I meant."

Kate sighed bitterly.

"I don't want anyone to control what I do again," Kate said, picking the thing that she wanted almost as much as their parents' return. "I want to be free, *truly* free."

"I want that as well," Sophia said. "But there are very few truly *free* people in this city. The only ones really are..."

She looked out across the city and, following her gaze, Kate could see that she was looking out toward the palace, with its shining marble and its gilt decorations.

Kate could feel what she was thinking.

"I don't think being a servant at the palace would make you free," Kate said.

"I wasn't thinking about being a servant," Sophia snapped. "What if...what if we could just walk in there and be one of them? What if we could persuade them all that we were? What if we could marry some rich man, have connections at court?"

Kate didn't laugh, but only because she could tell how serious her sister was about the whole idea. If she could have anything in the world, the last thing Kate would want would be to walk into the palace and become a great lady, to marry some man who told her what to do.

"I don't want to depend on anyone else for my freedom," Kate said. "The world has taught us one thing, and one thing only: we must depend on ourselves. *Only* on ourselves. That way we can control everything that happens to us. And we don't have to trust anyone. We have to learn to take care of ourselves. To sustain ourselves. To live off the land. To learn to hunt. To farm. Anything where we don't rely on anyone else. And we have to amass great weapons and become great fighters, so if anyone comes to take what is ours, we can kill them."

And suddenly, Kate realized.

"We need to leave this city," she urged her sister. "It's filled with dangers for us. We need to live out beyond the city, in the country, where few people live and where no one will be able to harm us."

The more she spoke about it, the more she realized that it was the right thing to do. It was her dream. Right then, Kate wanted nothing more than to run for the gates of the city, out into the open spaces beyond.

“And when we learn to fight,” Kate added, “when we become bigger and stronger and have the finest swords and crossbows and daggers, we will come back here and kill everyone who hurt us in the orphanage.”

She felt Sophia’s hands on her shoulder.

“You can’t talk like that, Kate. You can’t just talk about killing people like it’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” Kate spat. “It’s what they *deserve*.”

Sophia shook her head.

“That is primitive,” Sophia said. “There are better ways to survive. And better ways to get revenge. Besides, I don’t want to just *survive*, like some peasant in the woods. What is the point of life then? I want to *live*.”

Kate wasn’t sure about that, but she didn’t say anything.

They walked on in silence for a little way, and Kate guessed that Sophia was as caught up in her dream as Kate was. They walked along streets filled with people who seemed to know what they were doing with their lives, who seemed filled with a sense of purpose, and to Kate, it was unfair that it should be so easy for them. Then again, maybe it wasn’t. Maybe they had as little choice as she or Sophia would have had if they’d stayed in the orphanage.

Ahead, the city sprawled beyond gates that had probably been there for hundreds of years. The space beyond was filled with houses now, pushed right up against the walls in a way that probably made them useless. There was a wide open space beyond, though, where several farmers were driving their livestock on the way to slaughter, sheep and geese, ducks and even a few cows. There were wagons of goods there too, waiting to come into the city.

And beyond that, the horizon lay filled with woods. Woods that Kate longed to escape to.

Kate saw the carriage before Sophia did. It was pushing its way through the waiting vehicles, the occupants obviously assuming that they had the right to be first into the city proper. Maybe they did. The carriage was gilded and carved, with a family crest on the side that would probably have made sense if the nuns had thought such things worth teaching. The silk curtains were closed, but Kate saw one twitch open, revealing a woman within looking out from under an elaborate bird’s-head mask.

Kate felt filled with envy and disgust. How could a few live so well?

“Look at them,” Kate said. “They’re probably on their way to a ball or a masquerade. They’ve probably never had to worry about being hungry in their lives.”

“No, they haven’t,” Sophia agreed. But she sounded thoughtful, perhaps even admiring.

Then Kate realized what her sister was thinking. She turned to her, appalled.

“We can’t just follow them,” Kate said.

“Why not?” her sister shot back. “Why not try to get what we want?”

Kate didn’t have an answer for her. She didn’t want to tell Sophia that it wouldn’t work. *Couldn’t* work. That it wasn’t the way the world fit together. They would take one look at them and *know* they were orphans, *know* they were peasants. How could they ever hope to blend into a world such as that?

Sophia was the elder sister; she was supposed to know all this already.

Besides, in that moment, Kate’s eyes fell on something that was equally enticing to her. There were men forming up near the side of the square, wearing the colors of one of the mercenary companies that liked to dabble in the wars across the water. They had weapons laid out on carts, and horses. A few of them were even having an impromptu fencing tournament with blunted steel swords.

Kate eyed the weapons, and she saw what she needed: racks of steel. Daggers, swords, crossbows, traps for hunting. With even a few of these things, she could learn to trap and live off the land.

“Don’t,” Sophia said, watching her gaze, laying a hand on her arm.

Kate pulled free, but gently. “Come with me,” Kate said, determined.

She saw her sister shake her head. “You know I can’t. That isn’t for me. It’s not who I am. It’s not what I want, Kate.”

And trying to blend with a bunch of nobles wasn't what Kate wanted.

She could feel her sister's certainty, she could feel her own, and she had a sudden sense of where this was going. The knowledge of it made tears sting her eyes. She threw her arms around her sister, just as her sister embraced her.

"I don't want to leave you," Kate said.

"I don't want to leave you either," Sophia replied, "but maybe we need to each try our own way, at least for a little while. You are as stubborn as I, and we each have our own dream. I am convinced I can make it, and that then I can help you."

Kate smiled.

"And I am convinced *I* can make it, and then I can help you."

Kate could see the tears in her sister's eyes now too, but more than that, she could feel the sadness there through the connection they shared.

"You're right," Sophia said. "You wouldn't fit in at court, and *I* wouldn't fit in, in some wilderness, or learning to fight. So maybe we have to do this separately. Maybe our best chances of survival are by being apart. If nothing else, if one of us is caught, then the other can come rescue her."

Kate wanted to tell Sophia that she was wrong, but the truth was that everything she was saying made sense.

"I'll find you afterwards," Kate said. "I'll learn how to fight and how to live in the countryside, and I'll find you. Then you will see, and you will come join me."

"And I will find *you* when I've succeeded at court," Sophia countered with a smile. "You will join me in the palace and marry a prince, and rule over this town."

They each smiled wide, tears rolling down their cheeks.

But you won't ever be alone, Sophia added, the words ringing in Kate's mind. *I will always be as close as a thought*.

Kate couldn't bear the sadness anymore, and she knew she had to act before she changed her mind.

So she hugged her sister one last time, let go, and ran in the direction of the weapons.

It was time to risk it all.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sophia could feel the determination burning inside her as she set off across Ashton, making for the walled precinct where the palace lay. She hurried down the streets, dodging horses and occasionally hopping onto the back of wagons when it looked as though they might be heading in the right direction.

Even with that, it took time to cross the expanse of the place, moving through the Screws, the Merchant Quarter, Knotty Hill, and the other districts one by one. They were so strange and full of life after her time in the House of the Unclaimed that Sophia wished she had more time in which to explore them. She found herself standing outside a great circular theater, wishing that there were enough time to go inside.

There wasn't, though, because if she missed the masked ball tonight, she wasn't sure how she was going to find the place at court she wanted. A masked ball, even she knew, didn't come around very often, and it would offer her best chance to sneak in.

She worried about Kate as she went. It felt strange, after so long, simply walking in opposite directions. But the truth was that they wanted different things from their lives. Sophia would find her, when this was done. When she had a life settled among the nobles of Ashton, she would find Kate and make everything all right.

The gates to the walled precinct that held the palace lay ahead. As Sophia had expected, they were thrown open for the evening, and beyond them, she could see formal gardens laid out in neat rows of hedges and roses. There were even great expanses of grass, trimmed shorter than any farmer's field could be, and that in itself seemed like a sign of luxury when anyone else in the city who had a scrap of land beside their house had to use it to grow food.

There were lanterns set up on poles every few steps within the gardens. They weren't lit yet, but by night, they would turn the whole place into a wash of bright light, letting people dance on the lawns as easily as in one of the great rooms of the palace.

Sophia could see people heading inside, one after another. There was a gold-liveried servant by the gate, along with two guards in the brightest blue, their muskets shouldered in perfect parade ground display while nobles and their servants sauntered past.

Sophia hurried for the gate. She'd hoped that she could lose herself in a crowd of those coming in, but by the time she got there, she was the only one. It meant that the servant there was able to give her his full attention. He was an older man in a powdered wig that curled down to the nape of his neck. He looked at Sophia with something approaching disdain.

"And what do *you* want?" he demanded, in a tone so arch it might have been that of an actor playing at being noble, rather than the servant of the real thing.

"I'm here for the ball," Sophia said. She knew she could never pass for noble, but there were still things she could do. "I'm the servant of –"

"Don't embarrass yourself," the servant shot back. "I know perfectly well who is to be let in, and none of them would bother being accompanied by a servant like you. We're not letting in dock whores. It's not that kind of party."

"I don't know what you mean," Sophia tried, but the scowl she got back told her that it wasn't even close to working.

"Then allow me to explain," the servant on the door said. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "Your dress looks as though it has been cut down from a fishwife's. You stink as if you've just come out of a cess pit. As for your voice, you sound as though you couldn't even *spell* elocution, let alone employ it. Now, be off with you, before I have you run off and thrown in a lock-up for the night."

Sophia wanted to argue, but the cruelty of his words seemed to have stolen all of hers. More than that, they'd stolen away her dream, as easily as if the man had reached out and plucked it from

the air. She turned and ran, and the worst part was the laughter that followed her all the way down the street.

Sophia stopped in a doorway further on, utterly humiliated. She hadn't expected this to be easy, but she'd expected someone in the city to be kind. She'd thought that she would be able to pass for a servant even if she couldn't pass for a noblewoman.

Maybe that was her mistake though. If she was trying to reinvent herself, shouldn't she go the whole way? Maybe it wasn't too late. She couldn't pass for the kind of servant who would accompany her mistress to a ball, but what could she pass for? She could be the thing she'd almost been when she left the orphanage. The kind of servant who would be given the lowest of jobs.

That might work.

The area around the palace was a place of noble townhouses, but also of all the things that their owners might want from the city: dressmakers, jewelers, bathhouses, and more. All things that Sophia couldn't afford, but all things that she might be able to get anyway.

She started with a dressmaker. It was the biggest part of it, and maybe, once she had the dress, the rest would be easier. She walked into the shop that looked busiest, panting as if she were about to collapse, hoping for the best.

"What are you doing in here?" a steel-haired woman asked, looking up with a mouth full of pins.

"Forgive me..." Sophia said. "My mistress... she'll flog me if her dress is any later... she said... to run all the way."

She couldn't pass for a servant accompanying her mistress, but she could be that noble's indentured servant, sent on last-minute errands.

"And your mistress's name?" the dressmaker demanded.

Is this really the kind of servant that Milady D'Angelica might send? Perhaps it's because they're of a size and she wishes to know if it will fit?

The flicker of Sophia's talent came unbidden. She had more sense than to question it.

"Milady D'Angelica," she said. "Forgive me, but she said to hurry. The ball –"

"Will not start in earnest for another hour or two, and I doubt your mistress will want to be there until the moment to make an entrance," the dressmaker replied. Her tone was a little less harsh now, although Sophia suspected that was only because of who she was pretending to serve. The other woman pointed. "Wait there."

Sophia waited, although that was the hardest thing in the world to do right then. It gave her a chance to listen, at least. The servant at the palace had been right: people did speak differently away from the poorest parts of the city. Their vowels were more rounded, the edges of the words more polished. One of the women working there seemed to have come from one of the Merchant States, her accent making her r's roll as she chattered with the others.

It wasn't long before the original dressmaker came out with a dress, holding it up to Sophia for inspection. It was the single most beautiful thing Sophia had ever seen. It shone silver and blue, seeming to shimmer as it moved. The bodice was worked with silver thread, and even the underskirts shimmered in waves, which seemed like a waste. Who would see them?

"Milady D'Angelica and you are the same size, yes?" the dressmaker demanded.

"Yes, ma'am," Sophia replied. "It's why she sent me."

"Then she should have sent you in the first place, rather than just a list of measurements."

"I'll be sure to tell her," Sophia said.

That made the dressmaker pale with horror, as if the sheer thought of it were enough that it might give her a heart attack.

"There's no need for that. It's very close, but I just need to adjust a couple of things. You're *certain* that you are her size?"

Sophia nodded. "To the inch, ma'am. She has me eat exactly what she does so that we stay the same."

It was a wild, foolish detail to make up, but the dressmaker seemed to swallow it. Perhaps it was the kind of extravagance she believed a noblewoman might stoop to. Either way, she made the adjustments so fast that Sophia could barely believe it, finally handing her a package wrapped in patterned paper.

“The bill to go on Milady’s account?” the dressmaker asked. There was a note of hope there, as if Sophia might have the money on her, but Sophia could only nod. “Of course, of course. I trust that Milady D’Angelica will be pleased.”

“I’m sure she will be,” Sophia said. She practically ran for the door.

Actually, she was sure that the noble would be furious, but Sophia didn’t plan on being around for that part.

She had other places to go, for one thing, and other packages to “collect” on her “mistress’s” behalf.

At a cobbler’s shop, she collected boots of the finest pale leather, set off with etched lines showing a scene from the Nameless Goddess’s life. At a perfumer’s shop, she acquired a small vial that smelled as though its creator had somehow distilled the essence of everything beautiful into one fragrant combination.

“It is my greatest work!” he proclaimed. “I hope that Lady Beaufort enjoys it.”

At each stop, Sophia picked a fresh noblewoman to be the servant of. That was simple practicality: she couldn’t guarantee that Milady D’Angelica had been to every shop in town. With some of the shops, she picked the names from the owners’ thoughts. With others, when her talent wouldn’t come, she had to keep the conversation hovering until they made assumptions, or, in one case, until she could steal an upside-down glance at a log book over the shop’s counter.

It seemed to get easier, the more she stole. Each preceding piece of her stolen outfit served as a kind of credential for the next, because obviously those other shopkeepers wouldn’t have given things to the wrong person. By the time she arrived at the shop where they sold masks, the storekeeper was practically pressing his wares into her hands before she was through the doors. It was a half mask of carved ebony, scene after scene of the Masked Goddess seeking hospitality set off with feathers around the edges and pinpoints of jewels around the eyes. They were probably designed to make it seem as though the eyes of the wearer were shining with reflected light.

Sophia felt a small flash of guilt as she took it, adding it to the not inconsiderable pile of packages in her arms. She was stealing from so many people, taking things that they’d worked to produce, and that others had paid for. Or would pay for, or hadn’t quite paid for; Sophia still hadn’t wrapped her head around the ways in which nobles seemed to buy things without quite paying for them.

It was only a brief flash of guilt, though, because they all had so much compared to the orphans back in the House of the Unclaimed. Just the jewels on this mask would have changed their lives.

For now, Sophia needed to change herself, and she couldn’t go into the party still filthy from sleeping beside the river. She walked around the bathhouses, waiting until she found one with carriages waiting by the door, and which advertised separate bathing for ladies of quality. She had no coins to pay, but she walked to the doors anyway, ignoring the look the large, muscular proprietor gave her.

“My mistress is within,” she said. “She told me to fetch everything by the time she was finished bathing, or there would be trouble.”

He looked her up and down. Again, the packages in Sophia’s hands seemed to work like a passport. “Then you’d better get inside, hadn’t you? The changing rooms are over on your left.”

Sophia went to them, putting her stolen prizes down in a room that was hot with steam from the baths. Women came and went wearing the winding sheets that served to dry them. None of them looked twice at Sophia.

She undressed, wrapping a sheet around herself and heading into the baths. They were set out in the style they favored across the water, with multiple hot, warm, and cold pools, masseuses at the side, and waiting servants.

Sophia was all too aware of the tattoo on her ankle proclaiming what she was, but there were indentured servants there with their mistresses, there to massage them with scented oils or scrape combs through their hair. If anyone noticed the mark, they obviously assumed that Sophia was there for that reason.

Even so, she didn't take the time to luxuriate in the baths that she might have. She wanted to get out of there before anyone asked questions. She dunked herself under the water, scrubbing with soap and trying to get the worst of the dirt from her. When she stepped from the bath, she made sure that her winding sheet reached all the way to her ankles.

Back in the dressing room, she pieced her new self together one step at a time. She started with silk stockings and underskirts, then worked up through corsetry and outer skirts, gloves, and more.

"Does my lady require assistance with her hair?" a woman asked, and Sophia looked across to see a servant watching her.

"If you would," Sophia said, trying to remember how nobles talked. It occurred to her that this would be easier if no one thought she was from around there, so she added a hint of the Merchant States accent she'd heard at the dressmaker's. To her surprise, it came easily, her voice adjusting as quickly as the rest of her had.

The girl dried and braided her hair in an elaborate knot that Sophia could barely follow. When it was done, she settled her mask in place, then headed outside, making her way among the carriages there until she spotted one that wasn't taken.

"You there!" she called, her newfound voice seeming strange to her ears right then. "Yes, you! Take me to the palace at once, and don't stop along the way. I'm in a hurry. And don't start asking for the fare. You can send the bill to Lord Dunham and he can feel grateful that it's all I'm costing him tonight."

She didn't even know if there was a Lord Dunham, but the name felt right. She expected the carriage driver to argue, or at least dicker over the fare. Instead, he just bowed.

"Yes, my lady."

The carriage ride through the city was more comfortable than Sophia could have imagined. More comfortable than jumping on the back of wagons, certainly, and far shorter. In a matter of minutes, she could see the gates approaching. Sophia felt her heart tighten, because the same servant was still working on them. Could she do this? Would he recognize her?

The carriage slowed, and Sophia forced herself to lean out, hoping that she looked as she should.

"Is the ball in full swing yet?" she demanded in her new accent. "Have I arrived at the right time to make an impact? More to the point, how do I look? My servants tell me that this is suitable for your court, but I feel I look like some docksides whore."

She couldn't resist that small revenge. The servant on the gate bowed deeply.

"My lady could not have timed her arrival better," he assured her, with the kind of false sincerity that Sophia guessed nobles liked. "And she looks absolutely lovely, of course. Please, go straight through."

Sophia closed the curtain to the carriage as it drove on, but only so it would hide her stunned relief. This was working. It was actually working.

She just hoped that things were working out as well for Kate.

CHAPTER SIX

Kate was enjoying the city more than she would have thought possible alone. She still ached with the loss of her sister, and she still wanted to get out into the open countryside, but for now, Ashton was her playground.

She made her way through the city streets, and there was something particularly appealing about being lost in the crowds. Nobody looked her way, any more than they looked at the other urchins or apprentices, younger sons or would-be fighters of the town. In her boyish costume and with the short spikes of her hair, Kate could have passed for any of them.

There was so much to see in the city, and not just the horses that Kate cast a covetous eye over every time she passed one. She paused opposite a vendor selling hunting weapons out of a wagon, the light crossbows and occasional muskets looking impossibly grand. If Kate could have snatched one, she would have, but the man kept a careful eye on everyone who came close.

Not everyone was so careful, though. She managed to snatch a hunk of bread from a café table, a knife from where someone had used it to pin up a religious pamphlet. Her talent wasn't perfect, but knowing where people's thoughts and attention were was a big advantage when it came to the city.

She kept on, looking for an opportunity to take more of what she would need for life out in the country. It was spring, but that just meant rain instead of snow most days. What would she need? Kate started to check things off on her fingers. A bag, twine to make traps for animals, a crossbow if she could get one, an oilskin to keep the rain off, a horse. Definitely a horse, despite all the risks that horse thievery brought with it.

Not that any of it was truly safe. There were gibbets on some of the corners holding the bones of long dead criminals, preserved so that the lesson could last. Over one of the old gates, ruined in the last war, there were three skulls on spikes that were supposedly those of the traitor chancellor and his conspirators. Kate wondered how anybody knew anymore.

She spared a glance for the palace in the distance, but that was only because she hoped that Sophia was all right. That kind of place was for the likes of the dowager queen and her sons, the nobles and their servants trying to shut out the troubles of the real world with their parties and their hunts, not real people.

"Hey, boy, if you've got coin to spend, I'll show you a good time," a woman called from the doorway of a house whose purpose was obvious even if it had no sign. A man who could have wrestled bears stood on the door, while Kate could hear the sounds of people enjoying themselves too much even though it wasn't dark yet.

"I'm not a boy," she snapped back.

The woman shrugged. "I'm not picky. Or come in and make yourself some coin. The old lechers like the boyish ones."

Kate stalked on, not dignifying that with an answer. That wasn't the life she had planned for herself. Nor was stealing to gain everything she wanted.

There were other opportunities that seemed more interesting. Everywhere she looked, it seemed that there were recruiters for one or other of the free companies, declaring their high pay in relation to the others, or their better rations, or the glory to be won in the wars across the Knife-Water.

Kate actually wandered up to one of them, a hearty-looking man in his fifties, wearing a uniform that seemed better suited to a player's idea of war than the real thing.

"Ho there, boy! Are you looking for adventure? For derring-do? For the possibility of death at the swords of your enemies? Well, you've come to the wrong place!"

"The *wrong* place?" Kate said, not even caring that he too had thought she was a boy.

"Our general is Massimo Caval, the most famously cautious of fighting men. Never does he engage unless he can win. Never does he waste his men in fruitless confrontations. Never does he – "

“So you’re saying he’s a coward?” Kate asked.

“A coward is the best thing to be in a war, believe me,” the recruiter said. “Six months running ahead of enemy forces while they get bored, with only occasional looting to liven things up. Think of it, the life, the... wait, you’re not a boy, are you?”

“No, but I can still fight,” Kate insisted.

The recruiter shook his head. “Not for us, you can’t. Be off with you!”

In spite of his defense of cowardice, the recruiter looked as though he might cuff her around the head if Kate stayed there, so she kept walking.

So many things in the city made little sense. The House of the Unclaimed had been a cruel place, but at least it had possessed a kind of order. Half the time, in the city, it seemed that people did whatever they wanted, with little input from the city’s rulers. The city itself certainly seemed to have no plan to it. Kate crossed a bridge that had been built up with stalls and stages and even small houses until there was barely enough room to use it for its intended purpose. She found herself walking down streets that spiraled back on themselves, down alleys that somehow became the roofs of houses at a lower elevation, then gave way to ladders.

As for the people on the streets, the whole city seemed insane. There seemed to be someone shouting on every corner, declaring the elements of their personal philosophy, demanding attention for the performance they were about to put on, or denouncing the kingdom’s involvement in the wars across the water.

Kate ducked into doorways as she saw the masked figures of priests and nuns about the inscrutable business of the Masked Goddess, but after the third or fourth time she kept walking. She saw one flailing a chain of prisoners, and she found herself wondering what part of the goddess’s mercy that represented.

There were horses everywhere in the city. They pulled carriages, they bore riders, and some of the larger ones pulled carts full of everything from stone to beer. Seeing them was one thing; stealing one was proving to be quite another.

In the end, Kate picked a spot outside an ostler’s shop, moving closer and waiting for her moment. To steal something as big as a horse, she needed more than just a moment of inattention, but in principle it was no different from stealing a pie. She could feel the thoughts of the stable hands as they roved and wandered. One was bringing out a fine-looking mare, thinking about the noblewoman it was intended for.

Damn it, she’ll need a side saddle, not this.

The thought was all the invitation Kate needed. She moved forward as the ostler rushed back inside, probably thinking that no one could take a horse in the brief space he would be gone. Kate wove her way in between the pedestrians who littered the street, imagining the moment when her hands would finally close around the reins —

“Got you!” a voice said as a hand clamped down on her shoulder.

For a moment, Kate thought that someone had guessed what she intended to do, but as the figure who’d grabbed her spun Kate back toward him, she recognized the truth: it was one of the boys from the orphanage.

She squirmed to get away, and he hit her, hard, catching her in the stomach. Kate fell down to her knees, and she saw two other boys coming up fast.

“They sent us out after you when you got away,” the oldest of them said. “Said that girls went for more than boys, and that they could send hunters for all of us if necessary.”

He sounded bitter about that, and Kate didn’t blame him. The House of the Unclaimed was an evil place, but it was also the only home the orphans there had.

She *did* blame him for the next punch, which rocked her head back.

“That’s for the beating you gave us with that poker of yours,” he said. “And *this* is for the beating the priests gave us after.”

He punctuated it with slaps that rocked Kate where she knelt.

"We've been out here more than a day now," the oldest said. "I'm hungry, I'm tired, and I want to go back. I'm due to go into the army soon, and you'll not ruin that for me. So I'm going to drag you back there, but not before you tell me where your bitch of a sister is."

Kate shook her head while he hit her again. She silently vowed vengeance for this moment, even though right then she couldn't even stand, let alone do anything about it all. She rolled up her hatred, tucking it deep inside with her anger at the sisters who'd brought her up so cruelly, and at the world that had stolen her parents in the first place.

Her hatred didn't do anything to keep the blows away, though, or deflect the questions that punctuated them like arrows.

"Where is your sister?" he demanded. "Where? She's the one they'll indenture for better coin."

"I don't know," Kate insisted. "I wouldn't tell you if I did."

She could see people walking past now. Some did it with fixed expressions, others glancing across then looking away as they decided that they didn't want to get involved. Kate saw a young man wearing the apron of a carpenter's apprentice walking past, and his thoughts flickered through her mind.

I wish I could help, but they're bigger than me, and maybe she deserves it, and what if —

"If you want to help, help!" Kate yelled across to him.

He turned in surprise, and actually started to step toward them out of sheer embarrassment.

"Stay out of this," the eldest of the boys snapped at him, but Kate didn't need more than just that single moment of distraction.

She kicked away from him like a swimmer pushing off from the shore, then scrambled to her feet and ran. Behind her, Kate heard the shouts of the boys following, but she ignored them and kept going, not even caring about the direction she took. She headed for the thickest parts of the crowd, thinking she could slip through while the others would be slowed, then took off down an alley at random, hoping to lose them.

It didn't work. Kate didn't have to look around to know that. She could feel their thoughts on her, honed to a sharp edge the way a hunting dog's might have been. The only promising sign was that one of Ashton's evening mists was coming down, making it harder to see anything, let alone one fleeing girl.

Kate ran down toward the river, on the basis that the mist was always thickest there when it came. Sure enough, it thickened into fog, so that Kate could barely see the length of the streets she ran down.

She reached a crumbling set of docks, against which plenty of small boats were mooring up for the night. Others were risking the fog, rowing through it or putting up small sails while guided by the light of oil-burning lamps.

Kate started to look around for somewhere to hide. She couldn't run from the boys chasing from her forever, but maybe she could wait until they'd passed by. Already, she couldn't see them in the fog; she could only hear them approaching. She headed out onto one of the crumbling piers used to moor the boats.

She'll hide on a boat. We need to search them.

That thought sent fear running through Kate. She'd been so certain that this would work, but now... she couldn't hide, she couldn't turn back. What *could* she do?

This way, a voice said in her mind, and this wasn't like reading the thoughts of the boys. It was more like the moments when her sister contacted her. *Jump to me.*

Kate turned and saw a barge going past, filled with the detritus of the city, lit by red and green lamps to show those approaching which way it was heading. A girl her age stood on the back, using a long wooden pole to guide it. As Kate watched, she lifted the pole from the water, holding it out.

Kate stood there in shock for a moment or two. She'd always thought that she and Sophia were unique; that they were alone in the world in that sense as well as all the others. The thought that there might be someone who could send her thoughts across to Kate was enough to make her freeze, trying to make sense of it.

What are you waiting for? Jump!

Kate flung herself forward, and even in springtime, the water was enough to knock the breath from her. They hadn't bothered teaching the girls to swim in the orphanage, so Kate spent a moment flailing before her hand closed around the pole the other girl was holding out.

She was stronger than she looked, reeling Kate in with the pole the way someone else might have hauled in a fish. Kate gasped as she pulled her way onto the barge.

"Here," the girl said, holding out a blanket. "You look like you need it."

Kate took it, gratefully. While she wrapped it around herself, she looked at the other girl, who was small, blonde, and streaked with the dirt of the things she shepherded down the river. She wore a leather apron over a dress that had probably been blue once, although now it was closer to brown.

"I'm Kate," she managed.

The other girl smiled. "Emeline. Quiet now. Whoever's after you, they won't see us in the mist."

Kate huddled down in the stern of the boat, watching the docks, or at least what she could see of them. They were quickly fading away behind a wall of fog as the barge kept moving.

As they disappeared from view completely, Kate dared to breathe a sigh of relief. She'd done it. She'd escaped them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sophia could hardly believe that she was inside the palace. Back at the House of the Unclaimed, it had seemed like a magical place; another world that the likes of her could only hope to set foot in if they found themselves indentured to the right nobles through some special skill.

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